

Lanes Training

You gotta love it, because it could save your life.

“Look back here!” barks Major Patrick Frey, executive officer for the 1st battalion, 363rd Regiment, 91st Division (Training Support), United States Army Reserve.

Frey holds up a \$1 bill, pulls out a cigarette lighter, ignites it, and sends the bill up in flames. “If this were a twenty dollar bill, it would be very valuable and a waste of money. But the time we have left here is valuable and its growing scarce. Use it! Don’t burn it! We only have two days of training left. You’re tired! You’re prone to mistakes! Sure enough, someone will get seriously injured or killed if we don’t remain focused. Use the remaining time to prepare these soldiers for Iraq. We owe it to them. Don’t get sloppy! Hooah!

Hooah! Reply the trainers and staff filling the Base Cluster Operations Center tucked away in a clandestine location inside Camp Roberts’ 40,000 acres of rugged terrain. The pep talk concludes nearly two hours of planning for the following day’s “Lanes Training.”

Lanes Training, in essence, is a circular loop that units travel, encountering and reacting to battle tasks at various intervals. The training tasks performed by the 270th Military Police Company (Sacramento), the 870th Military Police Company (Pittsburg), the 1498th Transportation Company (Riverside), the 2632nd Transportation Company (San Bruno), and the 1072nd Transportation Company (Fresno) included: convoy operations, reacting to NBC attack, responding to artillery fire, field headquarters operations, troop leading procedures, living in a field environment, defensive operations, force protection, and the law of land warfare.

By Major Stan Zezotarski, Headquarters, STARC





PHOTO BY JOE JOHNSTON, SAN LUIS OBISPO TRIBUNE

To create a reality that these units could face if deployed to the Middle East, the 91st created the imaginary country of Phillipistan. Like Iraq, the United Nations has extended international sanctions against Phillipistan. The convoy snakes its way through the Peoples Republic of Phillipistan. It rolls over hard surface, gravel, and then comes through a narrow road with steep sloped hills on each side. Suddenly, artillery blasts echo through the area. Smoke rises near the convoy's center. Vehicles lurch and brake into defensive positions. "Reaction to artillery fire," explains Sergeant Wally Johns, training NCO with the 1st battalion, 363rd Regiment, 91st Division. "The evaluators are testing the unit's reaction to indirect fire."



PHOTO BY SFC STEVE PAYER

Major Patrick Frey prepares California Guardsmen for combat duty and sharpens their combat support skills.

The convoy reorganizes and begins rolling onto an alternate supply route that the platoon leader had planned in case of such an event. The ride appears to be uneventful, but bumpy. As the convoy approaches points where the convoy might be vulnerable to attack, the MPs speed their Humvees with their MACH-19 machine guns to high points above the convoy, remaining in place until relieved by another Humvee or until the convoy passes. "Nobody thinks anything will happen," explains Johns. "That's when you usually get ambushed or fired upon."

But the MPs apparently aren't buying into this dull routine. Suspecting enemy action at a crossroad, a shrewd female lieutenant begins directing the convoy vehicles into defensive positions. Soldiers maneuver their vehicles pointing them outward, forming a 360-degree perimeter. Troops leap from their vehicles and assume prone positions. They survey the area for any sign of snipers or enemy intrusions, and remain in place until the lieutenant signals that it's safe to continue.

When the convoy resumes, one truck becomes trapped in mud. It spins its wheels, digs deeper, only becoming more entrenched. Three vehicles stop and the drivers and passengers get out to help.

"We're sitting ducks," explains Johns "the other vehicles should keep going and let the rear maintenance vehicle come up and pull them out. This is what the enemy wants." The vehicle escapes and the convey continues. The worst appears over as it nears the end of the lane. But the monotony is shattered. "Gas! Gas! Gas!," soldiers begin shouting. Yellow smoke consumes the convoy. Trucks and humvees swerve to the roadside and assume a defensive posture. Fully aware that they only have nine seconds to don their protective masks and gear, troops roll their helmets off their heads and into their cradled hands. Protective masks are ripped from carrying cases and quickly pulled on. Soldiers quickly test the masks' seals for signs of seepage and readjust the masks—if necessary.

"On the battlefield, the enemy doesn't put out yellow smoke during a chemical attack," said Johns. "It's orderless, colorless – you usually don't know you've been hit until the driver in front of you runs off the road. Each time we go out, we never know what's going to happen."

Then begins the difficult part: driving with full protective gear. "It's cumbersome," says Johns. "Your peripheral vision is limited. But in an NBC environment, you have to operate in this gear, you have to shoot in it, and in this case, you have to drive in it. The mission must continue because other units are relying on you."

The convoy finally completes the loop. Although trainers had planned an ambush, it was aborted in favor of keeping the unit focused on less complex tasks today.

Mistakes were made, and lessons were learned. Fortunately, for members of the unit, they will get another chance to apply these lessons – in training, and not on the battlefield where the first mistake could be the final mistake. 🐾